

ART. V.—*Note on Aboriginal Rock Painting in the  
Victoria Range, County of Dundas, Victoria.*

(With Plate V.)

By REV. JOHN MATHEW, M.A., B.D.

[Read 4th June, 1896.]

The Victoria Range, in the County of Dundas, Victoria, is remarkable for the multitude of bold, bare crags which crown its peaks and dot its sides. Some of them are gigantic in size and fantastic in form. On the face of one of these huge masses the sketches are to be seen which form the subject of this note. It is situated in the Parish of Billiminah about five miles east of Mr. Carter's Glenisla homestead, which is on the main road about half-way between Horsham and Hamilton.

On the north bank of the Billiminah Creek, at the point where it emerges from the bosom of the ranges and some three hundred yards from its bed, the rock stands, an impressive object, on the southern slope of a western rib of the Victoria Range. It rises abruptly to a height of upwards of sixty-five feet. The outline of the base is an oblong; the angles at the south end are approximately right angles, and the north end is rounded. Half-way up the rock on the northern side there is a large, natural cavern extending into the cliff some ten feet, the interior being visible from the ground.

The southern face of the rock is about fifty feet in width and projects over a plat of ground which has been cleared and levelled partly by nature, partly by human agency. The angle at the base is about sixty deg., but as the rock rises it declines more from the perpendicular. As the horizontal line taken from the middle of the base forward to the point whence a perpendicular would reach the brow of the rock measures forty-nine feet, the height of the brow from the ground must be at least sixty feet, and is probably more. The face fronts a little to east of south, widening and taking a slight turn to eastward near the summit.

The ground sheltered by the overhanging crag is marked by a curved line where herbage begins. From the centre of the face to this line the distance is thirty-three feet. This grassless, sheltered space is now a camp for sheep and cattle. At one time it must have formed a favourite resort of the blacks. Its former occupants have taken considerable trouble to clear away loose fragments of rock. There is also some indication of loose soil having been banked up at the southern edge of the protected part, suggesting that a breakwind may have been erected there. Looking southerly the view is charming. From the opposite side of the Billimintah Creek the Victoria Range extends to the south south-west as far as the eye can reach in a serrated line of rocky hills lightly clad with timber. In the immediate neighbourhood of the huge rock-shelter the hills are also wooded, the prevailing timber being stringy-bark. The delightful murmur of a waterfall comes from a short distance up-stream, and is audible at the rock.

At the base the cliff is a quartzose sandstone, of a greyish colour, translucent in places. Upwards the stone becomes redder and looser grained, and the striations are more distinct. Apart from a few cracks and easy undulations the surface on the south side is even and comparatively smooth, thus offering an enticing "canvas" to any one of artistic inclination.

As the highest markings are eight feet five inches from the ground in perpendicular height, it is evident that certain loose fragments of rock which lie outside the sheltered patch were lying at the base of the face and served as scaffolding to the artist when the paintings were executed, and were subsequently removed to render the place a comfortable camp. The lowest marks occur four inches from the ground. I take this as an indication that, since the completion of the work, a quantity of gravel has been gradually deposited under the shelter, having been conveyed from the east side by heavy downpours of rain and the trampling of animals.

The surface upon which the painting has been done measures from side to side thirty-seven feet. The work consists chiefly of numerous short upright strokes, a few slightly undulating lines drawn perpendicularly or horizontally, branches, foliage, and figures of animals. To get a fairly accurate reproduction is a

matter of considerable difficulty and necessitates very close and careful inspection for several reasons. The outlines are weather-worn and in various places it is next to impossible to distinguish them from the red blotches naturally in the stone. The difficulty of copying has been increased through the ambition of white people to secure a cheap fame by scribbling over the aboriginal work with charcoal. One feels indignant that so rare a relic of aboriginal art should be wantonly desecrated and defaced.

The paintings were discovered in 1866 by Messrs. Muirhead and Carter. The latter affirms that they look just about as fresh as when first seen. This is not surprising, as they are perfectly protected from rain. The oldest blacks professed to have seen them in their boyhood, but were so unfamiliar with the spot that they could not find it in spite of a day's deliberate searching. The authorship and date of execution were alike unknown to them.

An exceptionally intelligent black suggested that the strokes were a record of time during which encampments had been continued at the place. From their being visible upon some of the larger figures they are obviously, in part at least, a later addition to the picture. I have not delineated all the short strokes. Those I have given show how thickly they are distributed and their relative lengths and positions. It appeared to me that some of them were intended to represent grass and foliage.

The natives who inhabited the locality were called by themselves Kuli. They were of the same stock as the Victorian blacks generally, and formed part of the advance guard of the Wiraidheri, who inhabited the centre and south of New South Wales; the language of the Kuli, however, was marked by more numerous and distinct traces of relationship with the extinct Tasmanian race.

The principal subjects delineated are as follow :—

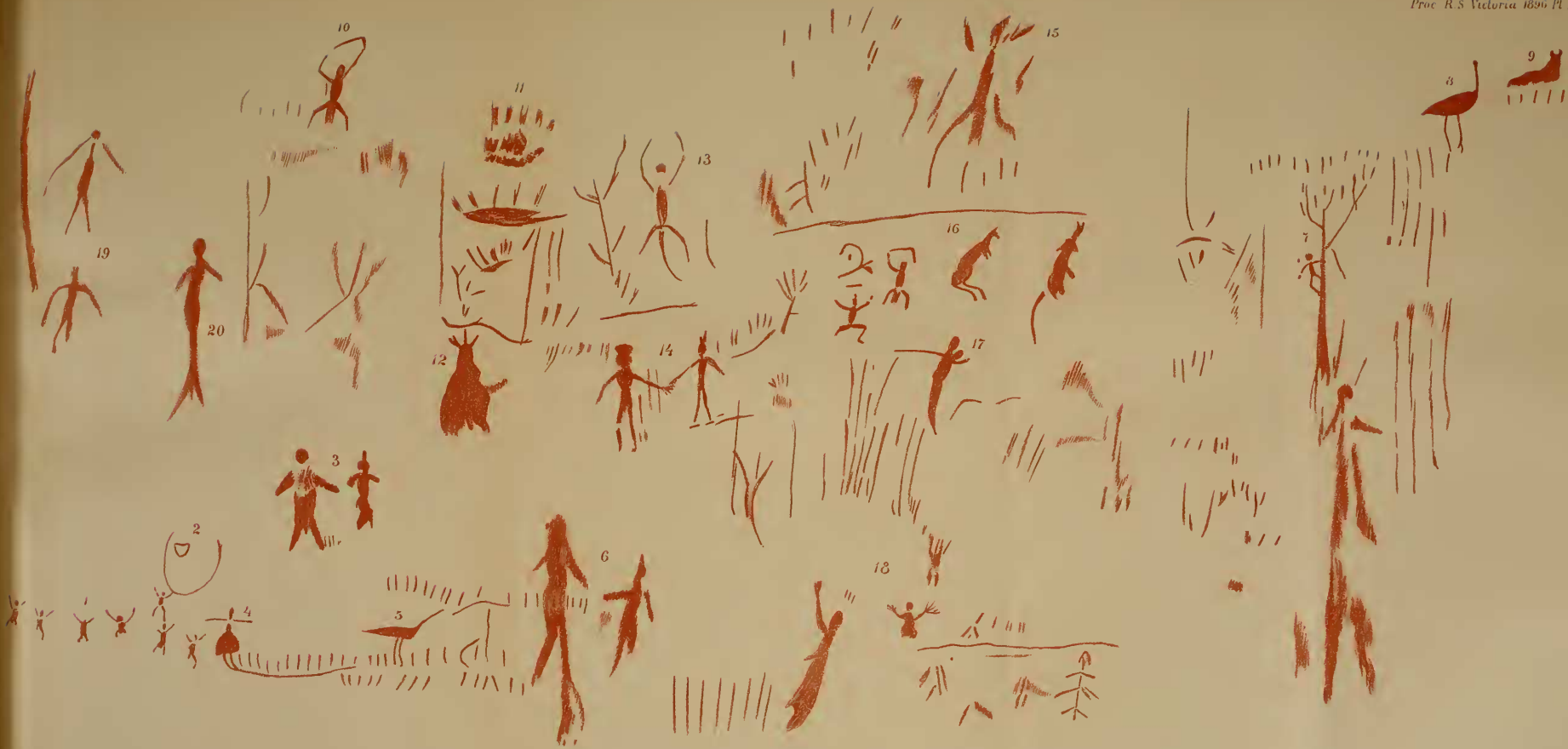
1. Seven men engaged in a corroboree.
2. An incomplete oval with a small figure like the conventional heart.
3. A man and woman, the man's left hand holding the woman's right.
4. Indistinguishable.

5. A wild turkey.
6. Man and woman, like No. 3.
7. Man climbing a tree.
8. An emu.
9. A native dog.
10. A man in the act of throwing a boomerang, the weapon remarkable as having an almost rectangular bend.
11. What seems to be a human hand. On the rock it has the appearance of having been impressed by the hand daubed with pigment.
12. Indistinguishable.
13. A man probably dancing in a corroboree. He wears a kangaroo tail and appears to hold weapons in his hands.
14. A man and woman like Nos. 3 and 6, but much better done.
15. Figure of a man, much worn away.
16. Kangaroo hunt; two men and two kangaroos; one of the men launching a boomerang, rectangular like that in No. 10.
17. Woman carrying child on her back.
18. Three figures, much worn, two of them female.
19. Two like figures, each holding a club in the right hand.
20. Seems meant for an iguana.

At the south-west corner I found small water-worn fragments of a loose-grained dark-red sandstone, which, when used as a chalk, marked the rock with exactly the same colour as the aboriginal scoring, but with a more sharply defined outline.

Rubbing the finger along this streak produced the same appearance as the drawing on the face which had been thus softened and dimmed by the weather. The figures in the painting are mostly of a darker tint than the strokes, and seem to have been made by smearing. Mr. Carter informed me that the natives used to gather a fine red dust, worn from the surface of rocks in the neighbourhood by the action of the weather. Mixing this powder with opossum fat they formed a paste which, when dried, they used as raddle for marking. No doubt the figures of darker hue were done with this preparation.

On a smaller shelter, distant some 200 yards south-east from the large rock, a few marks are to be seen. These embrace a



Scale : one foot to an inch.